

‘PRIMARY LINK’ WITH SCHOOLS – EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL SPORT MARKETING

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Context

The use of sport as a vehicle for change shows no sign of abating. Many of the change scenarios, from large-scale urban regeneration projects to specialized projects to encourage social inclusion, reflect a potential to affect social situations. The government agenda for sport espouses this necessity to harness the power of sport, and to utilise it across a number of policy areas. One key driver of change, and one key setting for change, as identified in the Sport England document *The Framework for Sport in England* published in 2004, is that of education, be it Higher and Further education or primary and secondary schools. For the overriding aim of this document to be implemented, of cultural change through sport, promotion and marketing has been identified as a priority policy area. However, calls have been made to deliver these initiatives through a modified ‘social’ marketing approach. Such an approach applies commercial marketing techniques to wider social situations, and, crucially, proposes a ‘relational’ rather than ‘transactional’ philosophy (Hastings, as cited by Beishon, 2005). Social marketing “...seeks to influence social behaviours” (Kotler and Andreason, cited in Weinrich 2004) to effect behaviour change through pulling ‘emotional levers’ (Beishon, 2005). Collins (2004) noted that the application of social marketing in sport, at present, is rudimentary and must be better informed from applications made in wider social situations such as public health and environmental cases.

This piece of research sought to investigate the effects that the community development programme of a professional sports club can have when implemented within an educational setting. The ‘Primary Link’ programme of Warrington Wolves Rugby Football League Club is used to enthuse, retain and develop young players. The scheme is set within the wider Community Game Plan of the club that establishes a commitment “to coaching, education, development, social inclusion and the provision of positive role models” which enables a positive impact on the community (Warrington Wolves Community Development Programme, 2003). *Game Plan* (2002) outlined the concept of social marketing in the context of sport, establishing five stages through which marketing interventions can bring about changes in behaviour. These stages were considered in relation to the ‘Primary Link’ scheme and an assessment of behaviour modification undertaken.

Method

A survey of PE teachers in primary schools that had received the ‘Primary Link’ programme was undertaken. The postal questionnaire used both open and closed questions to elicit a rating of the Scheme and to identify behaviour change both of the children and the teachers. A response rate of 55% provided a sample of 37, which decreed that the analysis took the form of descriptive statistics coupled with content analysis of qualitative responses.

Results

95 % (36 of 38) respondents provided a positive endorsement of the Primary Link scheme for the children in their school. As a direct result of the value generated by the Scheme, multiple requests for further assistance from Warrington Wolves were noted. Such requests included the development of lesson plans/coaching packs to enable teachers to continue the development of rugby league within the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities. Broader-based curriculum material was also desired, for example sport science and health-related content, as well as calls for stadium tours. Of high significance was the observation of an 82% (31 of 38) positive change of perceptions of the Wolves since receiving the ‘Primary Link’ scheme in the school. The main reasons for this included coaching quality, tournament creation and communication effectiveness. Most significant of all, the perception change manifested itself in positive behaviour change both for the teachers and the children. Multiple means of behaviour change were noted, predominantly through greater interest in Rugby League generally, through closer media interest in Warrington Wolves, to increased attendance at live matches. Interestingly, the ‘Primary Link’ scheme sat alongside other community coaching provision by other parties in this sample of schools.

Discussion/Implications

The concept of social marketing appeared to be implicit here as a result of the objectives of the 'Primary Link' scheme and the environment in which it was delivered. Furthermore, evidence of behaviour change suggested a positive impact by the Club on this group in its community. The scheme has the potential to cut across all five stages identified by the social sport marketing model outlined in *Game Plan*, since it created awareness of the sport of rugby league, motivated participation, created action and offered an opportunity to maintain commitment to the sport, albeit predominantly passively through spectating and related activities. The existence of other community coaching provision alongside Primary Link added further evidence of the social marketing concept. This occurrence would be viewed as complementary to the 'relational' philosophy fostered by social marketing.

The highly positive attitude developed by school teachers towards Warrington Wolves RLFC as a direct result of their receiving the Primary Link coaching had a very significant positive affect on the image and awareness of the Club in the local community. Nevertheless, such positiveness could become overwhelming for the Club in the light of the number of requests for further assistance and liaisons between Club and schools. A proactive strategy to address this outcome is likely to be necessary to avoid the success of the programme being outweighed by frustration in the desire to maintain beneficial direct contacts with the Wolves.

This initial, tentative investigation of applying the concept of social marketing to sport has the potential to create discussion and debate with interested parties.

References

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